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March 1, 2010

Military flu vaccination program a success

TRIPLER ARMY MEDICAL CENTER -- Coordinated efforts by the military services in Hawaii, reinforced by concerns about the H1N1 virus last year, are leading to record vaccination rates of all Hawaii-based active duty personnel.

“I’ve never seen vaccination rates like these,” said Lance Golder, DoD Military Vaccine Agency (MILVAX) program manager for the Hawaii region. As of Feb. 26, 98% of the more than 30,000 Soldiers of the U.S. Army, Pacific had received seasonal flu vaccinations, compared to 94% about this time last year. The Pacific Regional Medical Command reported 100% of its military staff has been vaccinated.

Most USARPAC Soldiers have also received their H1N1 vaccinations. Golder said that as of Feb. 24, about 84% of these Soldiers have been vaccinated, despite the fact that H1N1 vaccine supplies were not readily available until December.

“It was a huge undertaking, involving mass vaccinations at clinics, and troops lining up at worksite vaccinations, including Camp Smith and at the Kunia tunnel,” Golder said.

The seasonal vaccination program started in early September, as preventive medicine, clinic and military leaders realized they had to speed up the seasonal flu vaccinations, to make way for a second vaccination program for the H1N1 virus, when vaccine supplies for this virus became available. All the services’ efforts were coordinated through a Joint Public Health Vaccination Working Group, consisting of representatives from all the military services on Oahu.

H1N1 vaccinations are on-going at all military medical clinics on Oahu, at least through April. Primary care and immunization clinics at all Oahu military installations are taking walk-in patients. In addition, another public clinic is being planned at the Pearl Harbor Navy Exchange on March 13 from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. in front of the commissary.

“Supplies are now plentiful, especially of the nasal spray form,” Golder said. The nasal spray form can’t be stored for more than a few months, so healthcare providers are promoting it for children and adults 2 to 49 years old who have no underlying medical conditions.

The H1N1 flu virus has not been as serious as the seasonal flu virus strains for older adults, according to Maj. (Dr.) Paul Ciminera, deputy preventive medicine chief at the Army’s Pacific Regional Medical Command. However, more serious cases have been seen in children and adolescents than previous influenza seasons. Almost all of the flu cases here are now H1N1.

Ciminera said that unlike many states, Hawaii did not experience a second H1N1 wave late last year. But the H1N1 virus may not be “seasonal” for Hawaii. It reached its peak in Hawaii last summer. How contagious it gets this summer remains to be seen.

“The best way to protect yourself and your family from the inconvenience or the worst effects of the flu is to get vaccinated,” Ciminera said.

Ciminera also would like to remind parents that children under ten years old, who got their first H1N1 flu shots last year, need second, booster shots, to ensure immunity.

“I understand the frustration of folks who couldn’t get it when they wanted it.” Ciminera said. “But now, it makes perfect sense to get it. The risk and the threat are still there.”



Cpt. Carlos Barrera, chief of immunology/virology at Tripler, adds a chemical reagent used to help identify flu viruses in samples received by the Tripler pathology laboratory. U.S. Army photo by Leslie Ozawa



Cpt. Carlos Barrera, chief of immunology/virology at Tripler, (from left) discusses techniques used to specifically identify the H1N1 virus with molecular microbiologist Arthur Wong and medical technologist Jeanette Fu. Wong and Fu are being certified to confirm H1N1 virus samples. U.S. Army photo by Leslie Ozawa

Flu vaccination is a joint effort

Army, Air Force, Navy, and Pacific Regional Medical Command's preventive medicine and clinical staffs on Oahu worked closely with Department of Defense' MILVAX agency located at Tripler Army Medical Center, and with Hawaii's Department of Health, to ensure H1N1 vaccine supplies were distributed quickly to vaccinate those who needed them first.

The job was complicated, since two supply chains were involved: Department of Defense, which managed the supplies for military personnel, and Hawaii's Department of Health, which managed supplies for the civilian population, including military family members and civilian employees.

"The state loaned us injectable vaccines for a key group of pregnant women, when military supplies were low," said Maj. (Dr.) Paul Ciminera, Pacific Regional Medical Command's deputy preventive medicine chief. "They worked closely with us to cover our shortages."

Besides walk-in clinic hours at medical facilities, mass vaccination events on weekends were also set up at military shopping malls and on school campuses throughout Oahu. As in past years, the Joint Public Health Vaccination Working Group, composed of Air Force, Army and Navy preventive medicine personnel, met regularly to plan, staff, and line up vaccine supplies for various vaccination events on Oahu.

The group was formed about five years ago, sharing a common goal of getting as many military personnel and family members vaccinated during the annual flu season. The work continued, despite working group members leaving Hawaii on permanent or temporary assignments.

"It is a truly a team effort from all of the services," said Navy Lt. Emily Owens, Naval Health Clinic Hawaii's preventive medicine department head who chaired the Joint Public Health Vaccination Working Group the past couple of years. "When the Army was short of injectable seasonal flu vaccines, we loaned them ours, and if the Air Force had vaccines when we were short of a certain vaccine, they would take care of us" Owens said.

"Other Navy commands outside Hawaii have been impressed with the results of our joint campaigns. They hope to adopt some of our vaccination strategies and to use us as a model to increase teamwork and compliance in their regions," Owens said.